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ABSTRACT

Rituals provide a latent structure for teachers that goes beyond the surface meaning of conformity and control to a deeper symbolic meaning for the participants. They are used as a way of defining what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, reflect the teacher's decisions about what is pedagogically sound, and are based on their personal ideology. This study-in-progress examined the forms and functions of ritual in pre-primary classroom settings, and examined ritual as a means of interpreting the tacit dimensions of how one pre-primary classroom teacher works within an implicit pedagogical framework. Several data collection methods were used: field observations, observational records, interviews, videotaping, and discussions. The ritual of mat time marked the beginning of the school day when the teacher constructed a meaningful context for the children which engaged them in her teaching. After children arrived at the center, read the message board, and greeted the teacher, they took a place on the mat and waited for the whole group to assemble. The mat session incorporated a greeting roll call, identifying the "star person" for the day, describing the date and weather, announcing events, and introducing the weekly theme. Although the teacher found it difficult to articulate her practice, she identified her reliance on the ritual of mat time in her teaching as providing continuity to events and giving children a sense of security through a predictable pattern of activities; it thereby reflected her personal early childhood education philosophy. (Contains 13 references.) (KDFB)

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RITUAL AND PEDAGOGY: HOW ONE TEACHER USES RITUAL IN A PRE-PRIMARY CLASSROOM SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Studies of ritual drawn from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology convey messages of conformity, consensus and cohesiveness as a means of maintaining the status quo. Questions arise, however, that warrant investigation particularly with regard to the role of ritual in structuring teaching in pre-primary classroom settings and the extent to which ritual serves pedagogical purpose for teachers.

The study in progress examined the forms and functions of ritual with particular reference to pre-primary settings. A key assertion in this study is that ritual provides a latent structure for the teacher that goes beyond the surface meaning of conformity and control to a deeper symbolic meaning for the participants. This paper examines ritual as a means of interpreting the tacit dimensions of how one teacher in a pre-primary setting works within an implicit pedagogical framework.

The interpretative paradigm of qualitative methodology has been adopted for the study with participant observation as the primary method of conducting field work and collecting data. The original sample comprises three pre-primary teachers in three school sites. This paper outlines a case study of one of these teachers and reports some preliminary findings of the research in progress.

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The pre-primary setting provides an interesting field for investigating the pedagogy of teachers as it contrasts markedly with both primary and secondary education in organisation and structure of the environment, types of programs presented, role of the teacher and staffing requirements. In addition, there is a sense of commonality among public pre-primary centres and, to an outside observer, pre-primary centres have a significant degree of uniformity. Children appear to be engaged in similar types of learning experiences. Teachers seem to share a common purpose tied to a strong history of traditions and deeply held beliefs about the field, which stem from a shared philosophical base. The teachers' everyday classroom activities have the appearance of effortless organisation and routines. These classroom routines have been characterised as regular patterns of action which have been ritualised. That is, they are more or less invariant performances (Rappaport, 1989) that have become a form of communication through their symbols and gestures. According to Olson (1992), teachers use rituals and routines to orchestrate life in the classroom and, although the terms are often used interchangeably, ritual goes beyond routine in that it possesses a significance and structure beyond the surface messages transmitted through routine (Harris, 1992).

This study is investigating more closely the interplay between ritual and pedagogy, and how teachers use both variant and invariant aspects of ritual as a way of defining what is to be taught and how it is to be taught.

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RITUAL

The study of ritual is embedded in cultural anthropology and is a complex and multi-faceted concept. The literature (Geertz, 1973; Rappaport, 1989; Jennings, 1982), drawn from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and theology, attempts to define the functions and features of ritual and, in doing so, exposes the multi-dimensional aspects of ritual and highlights the difficulty associated with its definition, use and comprehension (McLaren, 1985, 1986). Ritual has been defined as a pattern of action (Jennings, 1982); a form of communication through signs, symbols and gestures (Harris, 1992); maintaining social order (McLaren, 1986; Bernstein et al, 1966); being responsible for enacting meaning through concrete patterned activity or action (Geertz, 1973); and as a means of sustaining, transmitting and internalising societal and cultural ideologies (Geertz, 1973; Henry, 1992). According to Harris (1992), ritual pervades society and culture, and society's values and norms are expressed and transmitted through ritual. A ritual performance can be either a mindless or a purposeful experience for both performers and participants. In some instances, ritual may denote a simple event that is taken for granted yet, conversely, ritual may be loaded with expressions of personal knowledge, experiences and personal philosophy.

Rappaport's (1989) definition of ritual suggests that there are two levels at work in the messages being transmitted by ritual. First, there is the message transmitted through the invariant order of the ritual, being that which we see, hear and perform and, secondly, the message carried by the deeper formation of meaning as indicated through the variations, signs and symbols included in the ritual.

In its simplest form, a ritual is an uncontested pattern of behaviour which has symbolic meaning for participants. Ritual goes beyond the surface meaning and is symbolic of a particular world view (Henry, 1992). According to Grimes (1982:36), ritualisation occurs through stylised, repeated gesturing and posturing and the 'rhythms and structures arise on their own ... they flow with or without our conscious assent'. This view maintains that ritual is both an implicit and explicit part of everyday life, which acts to sustain classroom culture (Henry, 1992). By examining the ritual system through key symbols, it is possible to know and understand how ideologies 'work' and how they are transmitted.

RITUAL IN EDUCATION

Schools and classrooms have been identified as rich sources of ritual systems which act to create and sustain assumptions and values and which, in turn, have powerful consequences for teaching and learning (Henry, 1992). Attempts have been made to link ritual with pedagogy but, according to McLaren (1986), these have been both tenuous and undisciplined. Yet, the degree to which ritual and teaching are interconnected has been under-examined, particularly in the field of early childhood education. Whilst the literature on ritual and schooling (McLaren, 1986; Henry, 1992; Bernstein et al, 1966) has centred on the sociological issues of maintaining control and order, and on the transmission and internalisation of school cultures and norms, the extent to which ritual goes beyond this point warrants further examination. The key issue is that ritual is a fact of school life, is enacted by teachers in their everyday classroom activities and, as such, must play an important role in teachers' and students' experiences.

The pre-primary teacher's day to day classroom practice reflects clearly defined organisation and routines. These routines are acted out and installed through repetitive patterns of actions which have the appearance of effortless automaticity. Ritual reflects the teachers choice and decisions about what is pedagogically sound and worthwhile, and is controlled by the teacher based on a personal ideology and understanding of teaching and learning. However, the extent to which teachers consciously and actively think through, plan and use ritual to achieve particular objectives or outcomes is not known. It may be that ritual enables the teacher to work within a framework which has the appearance of a simple systematic approach or, on the other hand, the ritualised

framework may act as a profound experience for the teacher and as a basis for inquiry and exploration for those participating. The question of whether ritual is a mindless, unspecified activity for the teacher, a way of filling in the day or, alternatively, a sophisticated means by which the teacher systematically translates intentions is of particular interest in this study.

PURPOSE

This paper examines those forms and functions of ritual (those activities performed by teachers in their day to day teaching) that have the qualities described by Grimes (1990) as repetitive, patterned, traditional, highly valued, symbolic and perfected as a way of explaining what one teacher values, knows and does. For the purposes of this discussion, the following questions give focus to the description and interpretation of the data:

- How does this teacher use ritual?
- What meaning of ritual is held by the teacher? and
- To what extent does the teacher work within, around and outside ritual?

Describing and interpreting the pre-primary teacher's actions may provide a way of making explicit the complex range of knowledge and understandings of pedagogy, theories, beliefs and ideologies held by the pre-primary teacher that go beyond the notion of 'common sense' and personal value.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based within the interpretive paradigm of qualitative research and adopts features distinctive of ethnography whilst recognising the situational constraints of classrooms. The theoretical perspective which guides and shapes the investigation and data analysis stems from the need to interpret, understand and describe meanings and processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) related to the experiences and behaviours of teachers in pre-primary classroom settings. According to Erickson (1982:121), this involves 'being thorough and reflective in describing the everyday events in the setting and in identifying the significance of actions in the events from the various points of view of the actors themselves'.

The original research design takes the form of three case studies, with detailed examination and profiles of three pre-primary teachers within their natural classroom settings. During data collection (which is entering the third phase), the following techniques were applied: prolonged intensive observations in the field with recording in the form of field notes; observational records; taped interviews; video-taping and discussions. The researcher became immersed in the situation as a participant observer in order to describe and interpret action and meaning. Analysis has been concurrent with data collection and this paper reports a section of one of the case studies.

The teacher

Helen has been teaching for thirty five years and can be described as being in the 'twilight years' of her teaching career. She is a gentle, softly spoken lady, who radiates warmth, kindness and love. The quality which is most striking is her boundless energy and enthusiasm for the children and her work, to the extent that she calls them 'my children' and sincerely means it. An indication of her commitment is the hours she spends in preparation and organisation, often being at the school at 7.30 in the morning and leaving at 6.00 in the afternoon, with countless evenings and weekend attendances. There is an obvious joy for the work and company of children and she is passionate about the welfare of the children in her care.

> *I like to think that the child has the experience of coming to pre-primary and being free of any anxieties and pressures that might occur outside. That they can be happy and get on with their own little lives here in the*

centre and it be the most enjoyable part for them and a lovely learning experience. (Interview 1:5)

Helen's interaction with children is of a very high standard and she is extremely positive, continually praising, encouraging, supporting and fostering children's involvement and contributions. Helen communicates in low, soft, expressive tones and at no time does she raise he voice beyond this level. She is a master of non-verbal communication and there are moments when her face speaks a thousand words. Her eyes sparkle with interest, her smile conveys pleasure, her facial expressions portray a gamut of emotions: surprise, excitement, concern, approval and displeasure. There is boundless energy in her movements around the room as she glides between groups and individuals in an attempt to contact each child with a personal touch.

Despite the ease and confidence she displays with the children, Helen projects a modest and almost humble persona when discussing the art of teaching. In thirty five years of teaching, her experience has focused entirely on the children and meeting their needs, and reflecting on her own practice has not been a significant part of her personal development. Over many years of teaching, Helen has developed and cultivated an array of routines, procedures and skills and has refined a personal approach which has become a hallmark of her style and her reputation as a 'superb pre-primary teacher' (confirmed by the positive feedback she has received over the years and continues to receive today from parents, principals, colleagues and past pupils). She includes a wide variety of strategies in her repertoire. These range from teacher-centred presentations to structured free-play and discovery learning experiences. Some of the techniques and approaches used have been well established over a number of years of teaching. However, there is also evidence of taking on board the latest program innovations such as the *First Step* language initiative. Helen speaks about her teaching in the following manner:

> *In Grade One I decided I was going to be a school teacher. And, in Grade Three or Four, there was this young teacher and she was so kind to me and she would say there is a lot of work to be done if you are going to be a teacher and she encouraged me to keep a diary* (Interview 1:1)

> *I've seen changes in the system and what I'm seeing at the moment I particularly like. I'm really an enthusiast, not an expert. I call myself an enthusiast because I see things happening and what I can do for the children, and some of my colleagues say, 'Think of your age', but I can see the benefits for the children* (Interview 1:3)

> *I have established a certain pattern because I need to know where I'm going. I need to structure my day's work. I feel comfortable and confident in my teaching and I feel the children are secure in knowing that we are going to do this and this and this* (Interview 5:1)

Relationships in the classroom are very well established and are a joy to observe. There is an obvious display of affection between the teacher and children and vice versa, with children freely hugging and sitting on Helen's knee and putting their arms around her neck. Helen cuddles and hugs children in return. Rather than demand or 'snap' children's attention, she quietly appeals to children who quickly respond, thus gently directing and monitoring the behaviours of the children. Control is too strong a word to use for the techniques Helen uses to manage her group.

The setting

Radford Pre-Primary (pseudonym) is attached to the local primary school but is located off site within a short walking distance to the school. The centre caters for full day schooling for five year old children. Over the years that Helen has been teaching at this centre, it has changed status from

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community based to education department controlled. It is located in a middle socio-economic suburb in the metropolitan area of a capital city. The children represent a very homogeneous group in terms of social and economic status and cultural background.

The centre is a large open area, divided into a number of small play and work areas. An initial reaction on entering the centre is to pause and take in the visual stimulation. The walls are covered with evidence of children's work and of the current topic being explored. The ceiling is draped with art and craft work, and every section of the floor area seems to have a designated purpose. Despite the initial impact, the centre is neat and well organised. There is an abundance of high quality materials, equipment and resources, all carefully placed in a precise, orderly fashion ready for the children's use.

REPORTING THE DATA

The ritual of mat time

Mat time marks the beginning of the school day for Helen and the children. It is a time when the teacher constructs a context which is meaningful for the children and which will engage the children in her teaching.

The children arrive at the centre accompanied by an adult, usually a parent. As they arrive, they stop at the notice board on the verandah to read the message left by the teacher. Every day, the notice changes and the children's interest and anticipation of the message is clearly evident. The parents have been encouraged to share the messages with the children and to 'try to read it together'. They move into the centre and enthusiastically greet the teacher. Helen hugs the child and, crouching down on her haunches, puts her arm around him and makes a personal comment: 'I see you have a new blue bag, Damien'. The greeting is brief and, as the children congregate, Helen acknowledges as many as possible and makes herself available to parents should they want her attention. The 'real' greeting of the children will occur when all have gathered and assembled on the mat. As Damien moves through to the wash room to place his bag on the peg, his mother makes her final farewell and departs, and Damien makes his way to the green mat. To the observer, this scene appears chaotic with parents and children milling about. Children are enthusiastically pointing out accomplishments and various features of their work. Parents congregate, catching up with social talk or waiting to make brief contact with the teacher. Helen is readily available to comment, listen, answer questions or offer suggestions.

The green mat is a large carpeted area of the classroom generally reserved for floor activities. The mat area is used for both whole group and small group gatherings. However, it is especially recognised as the place where everyone assembles and the teacher is the focus of attention. At these times, the children sit cross-legged on the mat, wherever they prefer, and the dominant activities are discussion, talking, listening and interacting with the teacher and with other children. Children recognise that a significant amount of attention and controlled behaviour will be expected and that the teacher will take the centre stage and direct and instruct the proceedings.

> *I guess I like the children to be together to begin with. I like to greet them each morning as they come in but, sometimes, I miss them when they come in with Mum or Dad, so I feel I should use the mat time to acknowledge them. I like the mat time to be a time for gathering, a time for acknowledging and welcoming back the children who have been away and I can't do that if I haven't got them as a group. I do my language things, my theme work and tell them what is available and what is new, as it's always changing.* (Interview 3:6)

The children sit and wait for the whole group to assemble and, as they do, they chatter in a lively and enthusiastic manner. There is a relatively high level of noise, but no one seems to mind as the

children make themselves comfortable and choose friends with whom to sit. The teacher sits on a small, child size chair at one end of the green mat and the children gather up close to her, vying for the front position. Attention is called and slowly the chatter subsides and the teacher takes control.

Helen moves through a collection of activities and experiences during mat time with the children actively involved. An interesting feature is that the session is interspersed with children freely commenting, giving opinions, making suggestions and adding their personal experiences. There is no insistence on 'hands up' to speak. Helen displays an amazing technique for dealing with the interjections yet keeping her train of thought and ensuring that she stays on track.

> *I am aware of this and I guess it's only through experience that I can do it. In the early years of my teaching, I would have been thrown by the children's questioning or interruptions. I think the children need to have a say. It may not always be relevant but it's important to them. And if I'm going to help with language skills they must talk. They can easily learn to put their hands up in Year One. I don't need to teach them that.* (Interview 6:6)

The mat session incorporates greeting every child in the form of a roll call, where each individual is called, acknowledged, noted and commented upon. A 'star person' for the day is selected and honoured. The date and weather are recorded. Coming events are announced. Special program features are highlighted. All these events occur in brisk fashion and in a repeated pattern, which remained consistent and unchanged throughout the observation period of six months. However, it is as though these activities are the supporting act to the main attraction, which is the theme work.

Working with themes is a key feature of Helen's teaching and has been for the eighteen years she has been teaching at her present school. Helen uses the theme as a vehicle for her teaching and regards theme work as a 'key teaching and learning time' in her program. Each week, a theme is chosen and developed through the various learning centres and experiences. She imparts a body of content knowledge about the theme at the beginning of the week and this is further developed and expanded each day. During the delivery, Helen embarks on an exposition of the content which seems to pour forth with a sense of urgency. The facts and knowledge are accompanied by the use of visual aids. A pin-up board contains pictures and photographs, whilst samples of books, artefacts and memorabilia cover a nearby table. Throughout the presentation, Helen makes reference to these visual stimuli as she tells her story. It is a monologue, although punctuated by children's comments, thoughts and elaborations which are acknowledged and worked into the presentation, with great skill on the part of the teacher. The entire event is over in fifteen minutes but, in that time, Helen has covered a substantial body of content. This content will be recalled and further developed throughout the week with other whole group mat sessions and with activity work.

The theme work carries considerable significance for Helen. This is confirmed by the way it has remained virtually unchanged as a crucial part of her program for so many years. Another indication of its importance is the fact that it holds a major place in the timetable and in the delivery of the planned program. Helen is most reluctant to alter or omit theme work from her plan. She explains theme work in the following way:

> *I guess the children's interests provide my themes. I like to do lots of informational things with my themes. I begin with 'Myself' and lead on to 'Community Workers' - the family members going out into the community - this is an interest for the children. The 'International Themes' look at the multiculturalism in our society. I do it to support the families. Then we finish with 'Christmas'. At the same time, I have a number of sub-themes such as 'Book Week' and 'Silkworms'. A lot is me talking and I guess all the children are listening. But, later on in the*

> *week, I will recall the facts and general knowledge. I want the children to build background knowledge so they can make connections in other situations. I think children are not exposed to general knowledge as much as I would like. We find out about things like science, about society and multiculturalism. I want to develop social responsibility, and children being caring and sharing and accepting each other. So, there is a link between the beginning of the year, the caring and sharing, and the end with the different cultures and society.* (Interview 7:3-4)

With the delivery of content over, the activities for the day are introduced and procedures are explained. These activities generally tie in with the theme and represent part of the choices available to the children. The children are dismissed in an orderly fashion and make their way to their chosen activity. This point marks the end of the first phase of the day and the children enter a second phase of practical hands-on involvement.

DISCUSSION

Although it is clear that Helen is an excellent teacher who is able to apply many sound principles with ease, she had difficulty articulating her practice, as was evidenced by her discussions and interviews. This was a new situation for Helen and being placed in a position to explain and justify her actions was foreign to her. She was confident and comfortable describing the children and her program but the *why* questions were problematic for her. Over the observational period, conversations became easier and, as our relationship developed and various techniques in interviews and discussions were tried, Helen's thoughts and ideas flowed more freely.

Helen's teaching is carefully planned and skilfully executed. Her commitment is unwavering and her relationship with the children, parents and aide is highly commendable. She has developed a successful recipe for teaching, reinforced by accolades from all sections of the field. This encourages her to continue with her successes, yet she also embraces the new. Years of experience have resulted in certain decisions about what is important for young children and these are acted out in more or less invariant sequences of actions (Rappaport, 1989). The direction Helen takes is guided by her knowledge, values and beliefs about the social world, about what is good for young children and about the principles she holds for early childhood education.

What meaning does Helen have for ritual? Not surprisingly, the concept of ritual was something Helen had not thought about. However, she recognised that her teaching practice was patterned, repetitive, perfected and highly valued. At the beginning of a discussion one day, she enthusiastically burst forth with the following announcement:

> *I need ritual in my teaching. I really do! I rely on those rituals for my teaching and they can be used as a tool ... An important part is the continuity. The rituals give the children a continuous pattern.* (Interview 5:1)

It was not so much a startling revelation, but a way of articulating her understanding of her practice. Helen saw ritualised action as providing continuity to the day's events, thus giving the children a sense of security in the predictable pattern of daily activities. She believed that the sequence of these daily events offered children stability and a certain degree of order and organisation. For Helen, this was a reflection of her personal philosophy for early childhood education, which she expressed in the following manner:

> *I want to make sure the child is happy, safe and secure within the environment. that's my big thing, I suppose. Then, I like to know their strengths and weaknesses and I encourage their strengths and encourage them to overcome the weaknesses.* (Interview 1:5)

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The morning session represented the construction of Helen's knowledge base. The classroom practice had been implemented over a long period of time and, for this teacher, had become ritualised. That is, it was clearly defined, firmly entrenched, well structured, certain and automatic. During the morning session, Helen had established a patterned set of behaviours which became a model for the children's learning and a shared conceptual schema which was acted out by all participants. For the teacher, it was an expression of a set of personal values, knowledge and philosophy. The teacher moved from the overt gestures of greeting, smiling and making personal comment and physical contact with children to the implicit purpose of familiarising herself with the emotional and temperamental state of the child in order to *tune in to how the child is for the day* and to ascertain *social, emotional and physical needs which will set the tone for the day for that child* (Interview 2:3). Mat time, an activity highly structured by the teacher, was understood by the children as a time when a high level of focus and controlled behaviour was expected and that the teacher would take charge and orchestrate the proceedings. Here, messages of certainty, conformity and unquestionableness were being communicated as the children were initiated into the culture of school and, more particularly, into the meaning of the actions and events installed by the teacher.

The theme work reflected Helen's personal view of what is important for the children to know. On the surface, it could easily be interpreted that scripted, fatuous knowledge was being presented. However, Helen had a framework for her curriculum which held significant meaning for her, which she highly valued and which she communicated to her children. More importantly, she saw theme work as building personal knowledge for the children which would form a foundation for making connections to future knowledge and experiences. Her personal philosophy of 'caring and sharing' and of everyone being happy and getting along harmoniously was evident as an underlying connecting theme to her program. The topics chosen for the theme work had a particular ritualised pattern or framework which was in accordance with Helen's personal belief system about early childhood curriculum and the ritual of mat time became a way of instilling this particular philosophy and technology of teaching held by her.

CONCLUSION

Helen's practice reflected a wealth of implicit practical knowledge built up over many years of working with young children. Her practice, which had the semblance of effortless organisation and routines and which was characterised by ritualised patterns of action, revealed a sophisticated knowledge base embedded in deep beliefs and theories about early childhood teaching and learning. Helen's aspirations and assumptions, together with a pool of experiences and personal world view, formed a source for responding to the daily demands of the classroom. In effect, Helen was working within a pedagogical format and the ritualised actions became a justification and enactment of a particular instructional form and teaching procedure and a reflection of her personal beliefs and ideology. For Helen, the ritual became a process by which she orchestrated daily life in the classroom and assigned meaning to the actions and events of mat time. The ritual of mat time provided the children with a sense of continuity, familiarity and security and the ritual became a framework for their learning and behaviour and worked to acculturate them into Helen's personal meaning of school.

Traditionally, early childhood education has been subjected to a number of common criticisms regarding the quality, credibility and value of early childhood programs. If rituals are part of the events which make up everyday life in the classroom and are constructed by the teacher as part of the interaction with students, it seems that ritual is a worthwhile lens through which to study the specialised knowledge embedded in teachers' actions in order to establish explicit principles and practices which reflect what pre-primary teachers know and do.

Describing the interpreting the forms and features of ritualised action in pre-primary settings provides a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of pre-primary teachers' thinking, their

beliefs, ideas and theories about what they do and how they do it. Examining the pedagogy, curriculum and practices underlying early childhood education will continue to inform the preparation of early childhood educators and move research efforts towards shaping the nature of the knowledge base of early childhood education for Australian contexts.

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